
THE PHANTOM WORLD OF DIGOEL

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In the final years of its imperial rule after the “communist” revolts in Java in 1926, the Dutch Indies colonial regime established an infamous mass internment camp, Boven Digoel, in the heart of the malaria-infested New Guinea on the fringe of the empire to force its inmates to live a normal life under abnormal conditions.¹ Boven Digoel, Upper Digoel, so called because it was located up the Digoel river, was not a penal colony. As the Indies government studiously made clear, internment was not a penal sanction but an administrative measure, invoked by governor general’s extraordinary powers, *exorbitant rechten*, to require the internee to live in a certain place.

Internment, and for that matter externment, was a long-established practice of the Indies state. In the twentieth century alone, Soerontiko Samin, a Central Javanese and the founder of the religion of Adam, was interned in West Sumatra in 1907. Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo, a Javanese, was required not to stay in the Javanese language regions of Central and East Java in 1920 and then to live in Banda Neira in 1927. Communist leaders, starting with Henk Sneevliet and A. Baars and including Semaoen, Tan Malaka, Darsono, Hadji Misbach, and Aliarcham among others, were either denied their right to stay in the Indies or required to live in many different places of the eastern part of the archipelago in the years from 1919 to 1926. It was only in the years from 1927 to 1940 that all internees were exiled in the same place.

Nor was Digoel a concentration camp, the Dutch historian J. M. Pluvier reminds us, for it was different from the Nazi concentration camps “in the way in which the inmates were treated: no one in Digoel was mistreated or killed as in the German

¹ The title of this essay is taken after Hannah Arendt’s “The Phantom World of the Dark Continent” in her classic *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, new edition, 1975), p. 186.

concentration camps."² The Indies government, he should have added, just let inmates die, go insane, or be broken.

Indonesians understood better what it meant to be exiled in Digoel. There was no shortage of information in the Indies about Digoel. Virtually every new internment to Digoel and every new release from it were reported in Malay language newspapers, often accompanied with internees' letters to their relatives and friends and their interviews. The government let Indonesians know about Digoel, no doubt, to scare them. Soekarno, always imaginative, was so terrified in a Sukamiskin prison cell in 1933 at the thought of living in Digoel, away from his mother and perhaps without his wife, that he asked for the government pardon in exchange of his quitting political activities and if necessary his cooperation with the government.³

It was Soebakat, however, who perhaps understood the political meaning of Digoel best. A founder of the revolutionary underground political party, PARI (Partai Republik Indonesia), he invented a code for its internal communications, in which "General Hospital" signified Digoel, while "Hospital" meant prison and "Abu" police.⁴ In his imagined political landscape of the Dutch Indies policed by "Abu" and dotted with "Hospitals," Digoel was the terminal destination for revolutionaries—in colonial Dutch parlance, *onverzoenlijken*, recalcitrants, incorrigibles, die-hards—suppressing the fear of which would make them real revolutionaries. Soebakat killed himself before being sent to Digoel to deny the secret police a chance to extract from him any useful information about the PARI. But if he had not killed himself, he would have found that Digoel, complete not only with its own prison, police, military garrison, vigilante groups, spies, and informers, but also with its own second internment camp at Tanah Tinggi for *onverzoenlijken*, was a metaphor for the Indies, the colonial regime the Dutch fashioned in the final years of their rule.

Establishing a Camp in Digoel

The establishment of a mass internment camp was decided on at an extraordinary meeting of the council of the Nederlands-Indië (raad van Nederlandsch-Indië) convened on November 18, 1926, less than a week after the "communist" revolts started in West Java in the night of November 12.⁵ The question Governor General de

² J. M. Pluvier, *Overzicht van de Ontwikkeling der Nationalistische Beweging in Indonesië in de jaren 1930 tot 1942* ('s-Gravenhage: W. van Hoeve, 1953), pp. 42–43.

³ See Soekarno's letters to Prosecutor R. J. M. Verheijen in R. C. Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling van de Nationalistische Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië: Aug. 1933–1942* [hereafter *De Ontwikkeling: Aug. 1933–1942*] (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1982), pp. 37–43; John Ingleson, *Road to Exile: The Indonesian Nationalist Movement, 1927–1934* (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, Asian Studies Association of Australia, Southeast Asia Publications Series, No. 1), pp. 218–221.

⁴ Assistant Commissioner of Police (Marinus Visbeen), *Proces Verbaal* [Soebakat], Vb. 6–8–30 B18.

⁵ The meeting was chaired by Governor General A. C. D. de Graeff and attended by K. F. Creutzberg, vice-president of the council; J. W. van der Marel, P. W. Filet, Ch. J. I. M. Welter, and A. M. Hens, council members; General Secretary (algemeene secretaris) G. R. Erdbrink; governor of West Java, W. P. Hillen; director of justice, D. Rutgers; director of internal administration (binnenlandsch bestuur), A. H. Maas Geesteranus; Prosecutor General (procureur generaal) H. G. P. Duyfjes; government representative for general affairs at the Volksraad, J. J. Schrieke; and deputy advisor for native affairs, E. Gobee. See

Graeff presented to the meeting was straightforward: whether measures should be taken "to fight the communist excesses which took place in the past week and to prevent [their repeat] in the future as far as possible," and if yes, what measures?

He said that he had decided before convening the meeting that it was imperative to place "the dangerous communist leaders" in custody as soon as possible for the interest of public safety, and had instructed the prosecutor general on November 17 to order the heads of regional administration in Java and Sumatra to act on his decision. In his view, however, arrest could serve only as a temporary measure, for upon completion of their investigation, the great majority of those arrested would have to be released for lack of legal evidence to support their prosecution, and then they would renew their activities once again. "But there appears to be a way to prevent this from happening," he pointed out, "namely that of interning the principal communist leaders on a large scale." De Graeff assured that the measure should be applied only to "principal leaders" and promised that all internees would be brought into a same place so far as possible.⁶

The council supported his proposal and decided that internment should start with those arrested in West Java and that the internment of those held in custody elsewhere should follow as soon as the prosecutor general's office, *hoofdparket*, received the necessary information for the measure. It was also decided that the procedure and formalities to be followed for internment be revised and simplified to expedite its implementation—the reasons given in the draft internment decision should be succinct and limited to eight points, the essence of which was that the person to be interned was a member of the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia), the party which joined the Third International, and was intent on overthrowing the established authority; that the PKI worked for the establishment of illegal organizations; and that its purpose was to recruit bad elements, *slechte elementen*, to commit crimes against the property and life of officials and against the safety of society.

The next day, on November 19, Prosecutor General Duyfjes sent a telegram to the heads of regional administration and informed them that "in connection [with] unrest [in] various regions, above all recent disturbances [in] West Java, the government is considering to apply internment on a large scale against communist leaders in [the] entire Dutch Indies, whose action poses serious threat to public quiet and order [rust en orde]." A slight but important change took place in a day to the category of people to be interned: it was no longer "the principal communist leaders," as de Graeff put it, but "communist leaders" "whose action poses serious threat to public quiet and order."⁷

R. C. Kwantes, ed., *De Ontwikkeling van de Nationalistische Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië: tweede stuk medio 1923–1928* [hereafter *De Ontwikkeling: medio 1923–1928*] (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1978), pp. 475–480.

⁶ "Verslag bg. vergadering van de raad van Nederlandsch-Indië, 18 nov. 1926," in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: medio 1923–1928*, pp. 476–477.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

On November 24, the list of questions to be asked at the interrogation of those to be interned was sent to the heads of regional administration. All over the Indies, all would-be internees were to be asked the same questions: his/her name, age, birth-place, residence, education, and occupational career; whether he/she was aware that the principal aim of the PKI was to overthrow the established authority; that the PKI established illegal organizations; and that the objective of these organizations was to recruit criminal elements for committing all sorts of crimes; whether he/she was a member of the PKI and/or one of its illegal organizations; and whether he/she participated in an action that posed a threat to quiet and order.⁸

These questions were based on the theory the secret police chief A. E. van der Lely put forward about the communist revolts. In a preliminary report he submitted to the prosecutor general he argued that "behind the seemingly clumsy and incoherent efforts of resistance against the established regime exists a central idea," as formulated in Tan Malaka's *Naar de Republiek Indonesia* (Toward the Republic of Indonesia), that guided the communist leaders and informed their actions. The prosecutor general, based on this theory, argued in his letter to the governor general dated November 21 for "an extensive application of extraordinary powers upon the *kern*, the core, the principal leaders [*hoofdleiders*] working behind the scenes, to prevent a repeat of the recent events."⁹ In the circular he sent to the heads of regional administration on December 31, he wrote that "this large-scale internment would lose its effectiveness, if a new group of leaders could come to the fore untroubled." It is the task of the administration and police, he continued, "timely to discern the significance and the threatening influence of new propagandists and to choose the best moment to neutralize them in the same way as their predecessors."¹⁰ Depending on the interpretation of the local chief, anyone identified as communist leader or propagandist could now be interned.

In the meantime, Digoel, which deputy governor of the Moluccas J. Roest described as "an inhospitable barren environment not without danger," "isolated," "thinly populated," with "limited access routes," was identified as a place ideal for the mass internment camp "insulated as completely as possible from the rest of society, severed of contact with it as much as possible—and separate always and for life."¹¹ On December 10, 1926, the area up the Digoel river was separated from the sub-division (*onderafdeeling*) of Southern New Guinea by government decree and was made a new administrative sub-division of Boven Digoel with Tanah Merah as its center.¹² Shortly after that, Captain L. Th. Becking, instrumental in crushing the November revolt in

⁸ Ibid., p. 480.

⁹ Procureur Generaal [Duyfjes] to Governor General [de Graeff], Weltevreden, November 27, 1926, Mr. 1174x/26.

¹⁰ "Procureur Generaal (H. G. P. Duyfjes) aan hoofden van gewestelijk bestuur," in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: medio 1923–1928*, pp. 520–521.

¹¹ The quotations are from the letter of Deputy Governor of the Moluccas J. Roest to the governor general dated Dec. 18, 1929, cited in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: medio 1923–1928*, p. 521.

¹² "Overzicht van de Inwendigen Politieken Toestand (1924–15 April 1928)," in *Mededeelingen der Regeering omtrent Enkele Onderwerpen van Algemeen Belang* (Mei 1928) (Weltevreden: Landsdrukkerij, 1928), pp. 9–10.

Banten, was sent to Digoel with his largely Ambonese soldiers and convict workers to build a camp in time for the arrival of the first batch of internees scheduled to arrive in March 1927.

While Captain Becking was on his way to Digoel, the first government secretary sent a letter to deputy governor of the Moluccas and spelled out "the Digoel regime of order":

. . . The purpose intended with this extraordinary measure is achieved with the arrival of the internees in the place designated as their residence and therefore any coercion with respect to their person which is inevitable in implementing [this] administrative measure should be terminated unless there arise special circumstances. In their place of residence these people enjoy the same rights and are subject to the same obligations which the law guarantees or imposes on all free residents and in normal cases the government and its organs should refrain [from doing more with respect to the internees] than keeping vigilant supervision [over them]. . .

[On the other hand] it is the governor general's opinion that the abnormal circumstance that so many people . . . are brought together in an as yet inhospitable place at the government's order as well as by the government's responsibility that goes with it[s order] for the life and welfare of these people can be a legitimate ground for special measures on the spot and in particular for more than normal police power of the Captain-gezaghebber [administrator]. To this regime of order should be subjected not only the internees themselves but naturally also their families . . .

In this connection it should be advisable in His Excellency's view that internees' families follow as soon as possible in case they have not accompanied them yet in order to encourage a regular family life and perhaps gradually to replace [their] present political ambition with interest in affairs of more domestic and social kind.¹³

In this letter Governor General de Graeff's voice is muffled by the government secretary's careful bureaucratic language. But substitute the first-person pronoun for "the government," "the governor general," and "His Excellency," then we can hear his clearer voice. De Graeff says that his goal is achieved with the interment of these communists and that therefore the internees should be allowed to live a normal life in Digoel as elsewhere in the Indies. There is no reason to be cynical about his concern for the internees' life and welfare. After all, it was his decision to intern them, and he was aware that his decision would force on them many sufferings. He agreed with the deputy governor of the Moluccas, therefore, for the need to institute a special regime of order in Digoel, but made it clear that it should be kept to a minimum. He wanted to see the internees and their families found a colony together with the government—he talked about colonization in Digoel elsewhere in the letter—and start a new regular and normal family and social life. He was seeing Digoel, as J. J. Schrieke, government

¹³ First Government Secretary to Deputy Governor of the Moluccas, January 5, 1927, in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: medio 1923–1928*, pp. 521–523.

representative for general affairs to the Volksraad, once wrote in early 1925, as a "humane" project to give a way out to "communist leaders and propagandists for whom there was practically no choice but that between propaganda and prison," to create a little peaceful Indies, an outpost of civilization in the dark island, insulated from the outside world, undisturbed politically, and closely monitored by the state, where the internees could do something useful and should not waste their life for the sake of untenable political dreams.¹⁴

Its History

Captain Becking with his men and convict workers arrived in Tanah Merah in January 1927 and in two months built barracks, warehouses, a hospital, a radio station, a post office, and a large and solid bath raft (*badvlot*) on the river for soldiers and convicts. The first batch of internees and their families arrived in March; there were fifty internees, including a Chinese, and thirty family members, everyone dressed up correctly for the occasion in colorful tropical costume with clean socks and shoes, a felt hat and a briefcase, and an umbrella under the arm.¹⁵

The population in Digoel increased steadily from that point. When controller M. A. Monsjou arrived, together with the seventh batch of internees, in Tanah Merah on October 30, 1927, to replace Captain Becking as the Digoel *gezaghebber*, man of authority or administrator, the camp population was 930 with 538 internees and 382 family members. It reached 1,139, with 666 internees and 473 family members, in February 1928. When W. P. Hillen, member of the council of the Netherlands Indies, visited Digoel in April 1930, the camp population was at its peak, with about 2,000 people, including 1,308 internees.¹⁶

Hillen's visit was the culmination of a series of government investigations into the conditions of Digoel, triggered by the articles M. van Blankenstein published in *De Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* in September and November 1928, in which he argued that there were innocent victims interned in Digoel by error.¹⁷ In response, the government had announced in the *Volksraad* in November 1928 that the internees were classified into three categories, *de onverzoenlijken*, the recalcitrants, *de halfslachtigen*, the half-hearted, and *de welwillenden*, the well-meaning, and that it was prepared to release the third category of internees, the well-meaning, if their internment was not based on

¹⁴ For Schrieke's proposal, see my *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 311.

¹⁵ I. F. M. Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel: Concentratiekamp in Nieuw-Guinea, Bakermat van de Indonesische Onafhankelijkheid* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1973), pp. 78–84; Verslaggever Boven Digoel [Mas Marco Kartodikromo], "Riwayat Boven Digoel (IV)," in *Persatoean Indonesia*, no. 36, January 1, 1930.

¹⁶ "Overzicht van de Inwendigen Politieken Toestand (1924–15 April 1928)," in *Mededeelingen der Regeering* (Mei 1928), p. 12, and "Rapport van het lid van de raad van Nederlandsch-Indië, W. P. Hillen, over de interneringskampen aan de Boven-Digoel, 22 juli 1930 [hereafter Rapport Hillen]," in R. C. Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling van de Nationalistische Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië: derde stuk 1928–Aug. 1933* [hereafter *De Ontwikkeling: 1928–Aug. 1933*] (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff/Bouma's Boekhuis, 1981), p. 463.

¹⁷ Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: 1928–Aug. 1933*, pp. 165–166.

sound grounds and if they behaved well in Tanah Merah.¹⁸ The governor general had also instructed the governor of the Moluccas in December 1928 to report "on their behavior, their attitude, their mentality, in short on everything that can give an impression as regards the question of whether they can still be seen as a threat to public quiet and order in case they are returned to their places of origin."¹⁹

Hillen's job was to observe the general conditions in Digoel, to interview the well-meaning, and to identify those who could be released. He stayed in Tanah Merah for forty-nine days, visited Tanah Tinggi, and interviewed twenty to twenty-five internees a day, totaling 610. He wrote in his report that at a glance Tanah Merah looked prosperous—the houses looked well-kept, all covered with galvanized iron, the gardens well-tended, the roads well maintained, electric lighting along the main roads, two schools, a hospital, a small telephone link, and a simple movie theater. The native population he met behaved well, calmly, and in an orderly manner, though he noticed after a short while that there were some who he felt ignored him and did not want to have anything to do with him.

But the situation was not as idyllic as it looked, he wrote, because there were many who, opposing the government as a matter of principle, were unwilling to work for the government, even if they could improve their material conditions considerably by doing so. The camp population was divided into many different and shifting groups, cliques and parties defined along political and ethnic lines, and divided between those who refused to work, those half-hearted, and those willing to work. Digoel reports local officials had sent to the central government were too optimistic, Hillen reminded his readers. Shortly after the Resident of Amboina visited Digoel and submitted an optimistic report on the internees' mentality, he pointed out, several internees were punished for their refusal to perform *corvée* labor and all the bridges in the camp were destroyed in retaliation. Governor of the Moluccas Tideman reported in March 1929 that "a good spirit" prevailed in the camp, but in the following month, sixty-nine internees were sent to Tanah Tinggi, and in his subsequent August 1929 report Tideman himself had to admit that about half of the internees remained hostile to the government and that he was not sure whether the "conversion" of many of those well-meaning was genuine.²⁰

Hillen argued, however, that there were not a few former peasants and small traders in Digoel who knew little about communism and what the PKI and the SR (Sarekat Rakjat) were all about. He recommended that 412 out of 610 internees he interviewed could be released, while suggesting the retention of Tanah Tinggi as the second internment camp for the *onverzoenlijken* (recalcitrants). He also had a serious doubt about the future of the internment camp at Tanah Merah. He argued that its "great disadvantages" such as infertility of the soil and malaria should be weighed

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 338, originally from *Handelingen Volksraad*, November 8, 1928, p. 1649.

¹⁹ "1e Gouvernements-secretaris aan gouverneur der Molukken (J. Tideman), 27 dec. 1928," in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: 1928–Aug. 1933*, p. 167.

²⁰ "Rapport Hillen," in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: 1928–Aug. 1933*, pp. 460–463.

against the advantage of its isolation when it came time to decide on the future of Digoel and that "a timely retreat appears to me politically sensible."

After the well-disposed [*goedgezinden*] have been returned, the settlement in Tanah Tinggi can be abolished and its population be combined with those in Tanah Merah. In the new place of internment the process of selection should also continue of those whose mentality changes for the better, so that eventually the number of those who have to be kept in internment can be counted by tens and not by hundreds. Then, perhaps, this new place of exile can also be abolished in the not too distant a future and the remaining incorrigibles can be put in small groups in various places in the archipelago, where they can stay in the middle of a politically apathetic population.²¹

De Graeff clearly saw his "humane" project failing. He acted on Hillen's recommendations immediately. The camp in Tanah Tinggi was made an official internment camp for the recalcitrants. He agreed with Hillen about the desirability of transferring the internment camp to somewhere else under the government of the Moluccas and instructed the director of internal administration to appoint a commission to study the matter. In December 1930 he also decided to release 219 internees from Digoel.²² But the time left was too short for de Graeff to institute a new regime of internment. Appointed new governor general in May 1931, Bonifacius Cornelis de Jonge came to the Indies to replace de Graeff in September 1931. In January 1931 he decided to retain Digoel as the internment camp.²³

Yet a bureaucratic precedence was set with de Graeff's decision to release internees. Notwithstanding the shift in Buitenzorg from liberal de Graeff to authoritarian de Jonge, internees were regularly released after that and the internee population showed steady decline from 1930 to 1936. J. Th. Petrus Blumberger, cabinet chief of the department of colonies in The Hague and the foremost expert on the native movements in the Indies in his time, gave the following statistics in the note he sent to the minister of colonies in October 1937.²⁴

²¹ Ibid., pp. 464, 469–470.

²² Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: 1928–Aug. 1933*, p. 470.

²³ Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: Aug. 1933–1942*, p. 319. It was perhaps one of many insignificant decisions de Jonge made as Governor General, for in his memoir, *Herinneringen van Jhr. Mr. B.C. de Jonge met brieven uit zijn nalatenschap* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1968), he does not mention this decision even in passing.

²⁴ The numbers for May 1930 are from "Rapport Hillen" in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: 1928–Aug. 1933*, p. 463; the rest is from "Nota van de afdeling Kabinet van het departement van koloniën, 15 okt. 1937," in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: Aug. 1933–1942*, pp. 468–469.

The Internee Population in Digoel

As of	Total	in Tanah Tinggi
May 1930	1308	70
Jan. 1931	1178	82
Jan. 1932	793	69
Jan. 1933	553	66
Jan. 1934	440	60
Jan. 1935	416	60
Jan. 1936	419	71
Jan. 1937	446	64

Petrus Blumberger noted in his report that about three-quarters of the internees at Hillen's time had been released by January 1937, while about one hundred new internees arrived in Digoel in these years. We can tell from the new arrivals who the Indies government saw as most dangerous enemies of the state. In the years from 1930 to 1934 they still included "PKI and SR leaders and propagandists" interned after having served their prison sentences because of their involvement in the revolts in 1926 and 1927. But they were of increasingly less importance. More prominent were leading members of the "red" trade union central, the Sarekat Kaum Boeroeh Indonesia (SKBI, Indonesian Trade Union), interned in 1930, and above all PARI "leaders and agents" such as Soenarjo, Mardjono, Sarosan, Djamaloeddin Tamin, Daja bin Joesoef, Kandor, and many others, interned from 1931 to 1934. Indeed, after the government discovery of the PARI underground, its membership meant an almost sure one-way ticket to Digoel in the 1930s. Then, in the wake of the government clamp down on the "non-cooperationist" nationalists in 1933-1934, non-communists such as Permi (Perhimpoean Moeslimin Indonesia, Indonesian Muslims' Association) and PSII (Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia, Indonesian Islamic Association Party) leaders from West Sumatra (Moechtar Loetfi, Ilyas Jacob, Jalaloeddin Thaib and several others), Hatta, Sjahrir, and their five other Pendidikan Nasional Indonesia (PNI-Baru, Indonesian National Education) friends, Partindo (Partai Indonesia, Party of Indonesia) leaders from North Sumatra (Moehidin Nasoetion, Abdul Hamid Loebis and several others) went to Digoel. And finally a new generation of PARI, PNI-Baru, and Moesso's PKI-Muda leaders (Jahja Nasoetion and Dawood of the PARI, "Moscow agent" Amir Hamzah Siregar, Ahmad Soemadi and Djokosoedjono of the PKI-Muda, Moerad and Bermawi Latif of the PNI-Baru, among many others) again swelled the rank of Digoel internees in 1936.

In 1936-1937 the Indies government also made two important decisions to fine-tune its internment policy and practice. In the first place, in deciding to transfer Hatta and Sjahrir from Digoel to Banda Neira in early 1936, the government in effect concluded that Digoel was not appropriate for university trained "intellectuals." As Dr. Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo and Mr. Iwa Koesoemasoemantri were interned in Banda Neira and Ir. Soekarno in Ende, this had been a practice as old as Digoel, but with their transfer to Banda, this segregation of "intellectual" internees apart from

Digoel became an established policy. As resident of the Moluccas observed in April 1936, those for whom the Digoel regime was inappropriate “because of their education, refinement or birth” were to be interned somewhere else.²⁵

Second, shortly after A. W. Tjarda van Starkenborgh Stachouwer replaced de Jonge as governor general, the prosecutor general’s office investigated in August 1936 the situation of 800 ex-Digoelists and 2,500 ex-communists released from prison. The study found that forty-five ex-Digoelists and 180 ex-PKI convicts were still under close police surveillance because of their potential threat to public order, but that few posed a threat serious enough to warrant internment/reinternment.²⁶ The prosecutor general concluded that it was desirable to release internees steadily, but at the same time made it clear that those who tried to develop the revolutionary underground even after the government measure against the communists was implemented—namely PARI leaders and propagandists and Moscow trained Comintern agents—as well as the recalcitrants interned in Tanah Tinggi should not be released from Digoel at all.

By the time Petrus Blumberger submitted his note to minister of colonies Welter for policy review, therefore, Digoel had long become an indispensable component of the Indies political policing regime, an internment camp inappropriate for university-educated “intellectuals,” a correction camp for all sorts of recalcitrants, who could hope for their release only if, in the government’s judgment, they behaved well and demonstrated their willingness to cooperate with it day in, day out, for many years. By then Dutch officials had long stopped talking about Digoel as a project to create a normal colony in an isolated outpost of the empire. Not very many perhaps bothered about it. It was simply there, conveniently, to get trouble-makers out of sight and, equally important, to scare potential trouble-makers from becoming too troublesome. Yet there was life in Digoel, normal on the surface, but in fact profoundly perverted, the sole meaning of which was revealed by liberation from it one fine day.

A Tour of Tanah Merah

Digoel was ideally isolated from the Indies’ policing point of view. Tanah Merah, the administrative center and the site of the main internment camp, was located 455 kilometers up the Digoel river—the distance from the river’s mouth to Tanah Merah

²⁵ “Resident der Molukken (B.J. Haga) aan gouverneur-generaal (De Jonge), 15 april 1936,” in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: Aug. 1933–1942*, p. 337.

²⁶ But this does not mean that no ex-Digoelists were reinterned. “Promoters and cadres [*kernleden*]” of what prosecutor general Marcella called a communist criminal organization in Kediri and Madiun were reinterned in 1935. Firdaus Haroenrasjid, former protégé of Hadji Misbach and chief editor of Moehammadijah journal, *Adil*, in Solo, after his release, was returned to Digoel in 1935 because of his attack on the government in his publication. Among those ex-Digoelists placed under police surveillance were Moefandi alias Boediardjo in Solo because of his contact with Amir Hamzah Siregar, “a Comintern agent” sent to Java by the British Malaya-based Anti-Imperialist League; Oesman gelar Soetan Keadilan who was sentenced to three year’s imprisonment in West Sumatra because of press offenses; one ex-convict suspected of his contact with the PARI; about twenty ex-Digoelists and sixty ex-convicts who joined the Partindo and the PNI-baru; and 45 ex-convicts in West Sumatra who joined the PSII, the Permi, the HPPII, and the Moehammadijah. Procureur Generaal [hereafter PG] (H. Marcella) aan G G (Tjarda Starkenborgh-Stachouwer), Sept. 4, 1936, Mr. 262x/37.

was equal to the distance from Batavia to Semarang or from Amsterdam to Paris—in the heart of the thick and hostile jungle and right in the middle of New Guinea, close to the border with Australian New Guinea. Tanah Tinggi, the second internment camp, was isolated yet further from Tanah Merah, located fifty kilometers up river from it. It took three and a half days to travel from the river's mouth to Tanah Merah by the police ship, Albatros, and five more hours to journey from Tanah Merah to Tanah Tinggi by motorboat.

The area was malaria-infested, hot and humid, barren, and very sparsely populated—the internees' neighbors being "head-hunters" and "cannibals" in the jungle and crocodiles in the river.²⁷ In its early years, two men were snatched into the water by crocodiles when bathing, one of whom was internee "no. 528," Mangoenatmodjo, former guru of Islam Abangan, who emerged on center stage of the movement together with Hadji Misbach and Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo in the Surakartan countryside in the heady years of 1919 and 1920.²⁸

There was no barbed wire encircling the internment camp, no watch towers. On the contrary, the soldiers and their families lived behind barbed wire. The internees were free to wander around and stay within a twenty-five kilometer radius from the camp. But one could go nowhere in the north, west and south, as anyone who ever attempted to escape learned from his "death march." If there was ever even a slight chance for escape, the route had to be to the east—going overland through the thick jungle, avoiding any encounter with Papuans, crossing over the crocodile-infested Mandobo, Kaoh, and Muyu rivers, and reaching the Fly River in the Australian territory. There were sixteen attempts at escape from 1929 to 1943, Salim says, in which sixty internees participated, about forty from Tanah Tinggi and the rest from Tanah Merah.²⁹

Najoan, who Salim calls "Jungle Pimpernel," made altogether four attempts at escape, the last in 1942, less than a year before the camp was closed, only to disappear in the jungle. Dahlan and Soekrawinata, two former leaders of the revolutionary committee in Batavia, were killed by Mappi-Papuans in the jungle. But only one-third of the attempts to reach the Fly River were successful, and most of the escapees who succeeded were arrested by the Australian police, sent to Thursday Island, handed over to the Dutch police there, and shipped back to Digoel by the police ship. The most successful was a group led by Sandjojo, who crossed the Torres strait by boat and reached the Thursday Island without any assistance from the Australian police. They stayed there for some time and even opened a barber shop. But one of them sent a letter to his family in Java one day to ask for money. A secret police agent was sent from Java instead of money. The escapees were arrested by the Australian police with

²⁷ Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel*, pp. 68, 81, 125; Verslaggever Boven Digoel [Marco], "Riwayat Boven Digoel (1)," in *Persatoean Indonesia*, no. 33, November 15, 1929,

²⁸ Mangoenatmodjo disappeared from the camp on November 13, 1928. See Mr. 1140x/1928. For his description of a career as a pergerakan leader, see my *An Age in Motion*, pp. 197–203.

²⁹ Mrázek says there were twenty attempts at escape between 1927 and 1935. Rudolf Mrázek, *Sjahir: Politics and Exile in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1994), p. 130. The section on Digoel in this book (pp. 128–153) is the best available in English about Digoel.

his assistance, handed over to the Indies police, and shipped back to Digoel.³⁰ No one, therefore, succeeded in escaping Digoel in its entire history. The freedom of movement and residence in Digoel was a farce. It only meant one was free to get lost in nature, in the jungle inhabited by parasites and hostile Papuans.³¹

Tanah Merah consisted of three distinct areas separated by small rivers: the administrative terrain (*bestuursterrein*) where the civilian officials lived, the military terrain, and the internment camp. For a tour of Tanah Merah, we have Chalid Salim as an excellent tour guide. He witnessed almost the entire history of Tanah Merah from July 1927 to its closure in 1943 and knew every corner of the place because he wandered about there every day, for fifteen years, as a worker of the malaria control service, looking for breeding grounds of anopheles. In his memoir he starts his tour of Tanah Merah from the dock on the Digoel River.³²

From the dock ran a wide gravel road, gently sloping, up to the hill. Along the road, on the right-hand side, was a long shed for "motorists," staff hired for maintaining motorboats, and past it were several well-kept stone houses for the low-ranking civilian and police staff, all surrounded with neat small gardens, on the left-hand side. Then, there was a new guest house, *pasanggrahan*, for sailors, the building which used to be a civilian club house, *burgersocieteit*, where silent films featuring the likes of Tarzan, Tom Mix, and Douglas Fairbanks were shown with a simple projector.³³

To the left of the guest house was a tennis court for civilians and soldiers, then the well-kept "Oranje Park" along the lane, where stood the large and pompous residence, almost a small palace, for the administrative head, an assistant resident in the 1930s, and next to it the more modest house for the military garrison commander, a captain.

To the right of the guest house ran a wide gravel road, along which stood a power station, a telephone office, a civil prison and a Catholic church with its mission center. Further down the gravel road was a shooting range on the right and a large empty field which bordered the internment camp to the north, where in the late 1930s an air field was built.³⁴

At the small power center and the telephone office worked internees, their labor indispensable to the functioning of those offices. Discipline in the civil prison was lax and easy-going, Salim recalls. In the late 1930s when he was doing a routine round as a

³⁰ Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel*, pp. 293–304.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 144–145; Tim Penyusun Pembuatan Buku Sejarah Perintis Kemerdekaan Departemen Sosial RI Tahun 1976/1977, *Citra dan Perjuangan Perintis Kemerdekaan Seri Perjuangan Ex Digul* (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Bantuan Sosial Departemen Sosial, 1977), p. 75.

³² Chalid Salim, born in 1902 in West Sumatra and a brother of anti-communist CSI-PSI leader Hadji Agus Salim, was arrested in Medan in October 1927 when he was an editor of *Pewarta Deli* and banished to Digoel in July 1927. Before his arrest and exile, he was active in the PKI and the SR, as an editor of West Sumatran PKI organ, *Halilintar Hindia*, and then Surabayan PKI newspaper *Proletar* (under Moesso's chief-editorship). Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven Digoel*, pp. 27–28.

³³ Ibid., p. 123.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 124.

worker of the malaria control service, Salim saw one of two police agents on prison guard duty sitting on a mat and playing the card game, "*tjeki*," with inmates, while all the cell doors stood wide open and the other man on duty happily dozed. Shortly after that, the guard alerted the people that an officer was coming. In an instant the mat was rolled up and put away, the inmates were back to their own cells, and when the officer arrived and walked along the cells, he was greeted by the guard who reported in a routine voice: "Nothing special to report, sir."³⁵

If one walked the original wide gravel road to the north from the intersection where stood the guest house and the power station, one would come to a well-stocked Chinese store on the right-hand side corner. Its first owner, Tan Toey, who was a small shopkeeper in Ambon, obtained a concession from the government to open two stores, one in the administrative terrain and the other in the internment camp. He made a small fortune through his commercial monopoly on Digoel and then returned to Ambon. After his departure, two Chinese store owners were invited to open up shop; it was hoped competition between them would forestall the establishment of a monopoly. One of them, Tan Tjo, who inherited Tan Toey's stores, eventually opened a "modern" restaurant with a pool table and served beer with ice.³⁶

Next to Tan Tjo's store were residences for native officials, first built in 1927 for Sundanese *wedana* (district head), Soeria Atmadja, and his Minangkabau assistant, Bitek.³⁷ Further along the gravel road was the administrative office, where several internees worked alongside the administrative head, two officers (*commiezen*), a few mainly Ambonese clerks, the *wedana* and his assistant. Criminal cases were tried in this building, too, with the administrative head as judge; the cases had to do with mostly minor offenses, but matters involving women and, once in a while, violent cases were judged there as well. In the building was a special secluded room, the Digoel archives, where dossiers of all internees, fattened by constant streams of information provided by spies and informers on their conduct, were neatly and systematically classified and stored.³⁸

To the north of the administrative building stood a Protestant church in the middle of a grass field. In front of the church, where the gravel road turned east, were the houses for the only doctor in Digoel and high-ranking civil and police officers. Further down along the road extended a large grass field, "reclaimed" originally from the jungle for rice cultivation at the order of an assistant resident to make Digoel "self-supporting." This rice project was disaster. The field was left empty for many years, but in later years internees cultivated vegetables and plants there, which made Digoel self-sufficient in vegetables.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 125-126.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

³⁷ This ethnic combination makes sense, given the fact that two largest ethnic groups of internees were from West Java and West Sumatra.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 126-127.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 127-128.

The gravel road then led to a large empty field, originally opened for an air field in 1937. That year a mining company, *Nederlandsch Nieuw Guinea*, called simply "Goldmine," came to Digoel to prospect for gold. It brought change to Tanah Merah by breaking the "deadly calm" in which everybody in Digoel had lived for ten years and opening a new window to the "civilized" world; before this time, the internees' only "window" to the world had been provided by *kapal poetih*, the police ship, which came to Tanah Merah once a month and, in 1933, once every six weeks. Many foreign ships came to Tanah Merah with the "Goldmine." Enormous quantities of material were landed at the dock and transported by lorries to the empty field. An air field was built with hangars and houses for the staff. The "Goldmine" also built its own post office, radio station, and residential quarter, where lived about 230 people—Dutch officers, Javanese laborers, and Dayak gaugers—headed by Captain Becking, the first military administrator in Digoel.

But the exploration did not go well. In 1939, in less than two years after its arrival, the company decided to pull out. Most of the buildings were dismantled and its material carried away. The air field went back to an empty grass field. Digoel returned to a solitary, stiflingly calm, outpost of the empire in the middle of the primeval forest. The population inside the administrative terrain was back again to about 120, though many Papuans regularly stayed there, wandering around for several months before returning to the jungle.⁴⁰

If one followed the gravel road to the north instead of going straight to the air field, one passed a small bridge to reach the military terrain and, further north, the internment camp. The military camp was strategically located, in between two small creeks, one separating it from the administrative terrain and the other from the internment camp. An internee who went to the administrative terrain had to show his/her pass to the armed guards standing at the entrance post of the military camp. The entire camp, called *tangsi*, was encircled with barbed wire and guarded with a watch post at its every corner. As Salim says, the military camp, more than the internment camp, looked like a concentration camp.⁴¹ This was true for a good reason.. As a 1928 government report explicitly stated, the military terrain was demarcated with barbed wire from the internment camp to protect soldiers and convict laborers from internees' "extremist" propaganda and to prevent unwanted contacts between internees and those who lived in the military and administrative terrains.⁴²

In the military camp were the soldiers' barracks, the garrison commander's office, a sick-ward, a munitions depot, a radio station, a canteen, a prison, kitchens, a women's quarter, and a small exercise field. The original camp facilities were built in haste in 1927, made of wood and covered with thatched roof, in time for the arrival of internees. In 1934, however, Governor General de Jonge decided to make the camp semi-permanent, despite the fact that he was frantically cutting back on government

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 129–131.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 132–133 and 144.

⁴² "Overzicht van de Inwendigen Politieken Toestand (1924–15 April 1928)," in *Mededeelingen der Regeering* (Mei 1928), p. 13.

expenditures elsewhere to cope with the financial crisis caused by the Great Depression. Though his 1932 decision to retain Digoel was not known to the internees, they learned from the renovation of the military camp that the internment camp had been redefined by the government as a semi-permanent establishment.⁴³

The military garrison originally housed five and later seven infantry platoons, each platoon with sixteen to twenty men under a European or native sergeant. Their mission was to maintain the local quiet and order in Tanah Merah, to take on guard duty periodically at Tanah Tinggi, and to patrol the entire Digoel region. Like anywhere else in the Indies, soldiers' families also lived in the camp, in a separate barrack; thus European and native non-commissioned officers, soldiers, their wives and children, and convict laborers formed a small world of their own inside the garrison, apart from the rest of Digoel.⁴⁴

Passing by the military camp and crossing another small bridge over a creek, the wide gravel road led to and ran straight through the internment camp, dividing it into two sections. Once a person entered the camp, the first building on the left-hand side was a small clinic for the internees, Wilhelmina Hospital. Along the main street were Kampung A, B, and bordering on the jungle to the north, Kampung C, situated on the left side of the street and backed by the Digoel River.

In the early years internees lived separately, segregated along ethnic lines. To the north end of the camp, on the river side, was kampung Ujung Sumatra, whose inhabitants were predominantly Minangkabaus. Acehnese and Lampongers lived separately. Peoples from Java—Madurese, Javanese, and Sundanese—gathered in their own quarters. Bantenese, most of them participants in the 1926 revolt in Banten, formed yet another separate group. Conflicts often arose between the Javanese and Sumatrans. Sumatrans found it ludicrous to see a Javanese internee-official being followed by another internee with a parasol. They also dismissed the Javanese arts, *tembang* (reciting Javanese poems), dance (*tandak*), *wayang* (shadow play), and *ketoprak* theater, as feudal. As time went by and as more and more internees were returned home, however, ethnic differences became less pronounced in residential patterns.⁴⁵

A congress building, *congresgebouw*, located on the right-hand side of the main street, was used as a theatre for showing films and as a gathering place on festive occasions. In later years, when internees became apathetic and deeply demoralized due to their prolonged isolation, it was left unused and desolate.

Houses were relatively well built, made with wood and zink roofs, some with plastered walls and raised floors. An internee from Jepara even decorated his house with fine wood carving. The school was in Kampong B, where internee teachers taught in Indonesian and Dutch. Salim describes listening to school children singing "merry, typical Dutch, ballads" as he stood in front of the school.⁴⁶

⁴³ Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel*, pp. 133–134.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–136.

⁴⁵ Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel*, pp. 225–226.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 137–139.

The main office for kampung administration was in Kampung B. It was headed by Gondojoewono and then Boedisoetjistro and had its own police force, named the ROB, Rust en Orde Bewaarders (Quiet and Order Guards). The ROB worked closely with the local government and its police force and was headed in its early years by Soeprapto from Salatiga.⁴⁷

A small mosque, built in 1928, was in Kampung C. Shortly after their arrival, Haroenrasjid and Ahmad Dasoeki, both Hadji Misbach's protégés and former leaders of the Islamic Communist *mualimin* movement in Solo, established a mosque committee, Comite Masigit, to open a section in the nearby forest and build a mosque. Natar Zainoedin, Hadji Datoek Batoeah, Hadji Achmad Hatib, and other religious leaders from West Sumatra and Banten established another association, Al Islam Association (Al Islamvereeniging) and supported the mosque committee. In Marco's words, "the AIV [Al Islamvereeniging] was an association to unify Muslims and the CM [Comite Masigit] became its executive committee." The local government then proposed to fund part of the project, creating a contentious issue among Muslims. The majority did not want to accept government money for building a mosque. The Al Islam Association was split and subsequently dissolved. But the minority went ahead anyway, accepted government subsidy, and built a mosque. Their leaders were then appointed as government officials, Marco wrote contemptuously. Haroenrasjid became *penghulu*, religious head, of the mosque. Hadji Emed became a *tukang*, workman, to swear in internees as government officials, and Ahmad Dasoeki became a member of the ROB.⁴⁸

Not far from the mosque was a tennis court that Boedisoetjistro had built to show to visiting Dutch officials, but no one used. Along the main street were several stores run by Chinese. The largest in the camp was that of Tan Toey and later of Tan Tjo, but there were smaller stores, *warungs* (stalls), and photo studios owned by internees. English words were often used for signboards—"English teacher," "Barbershop," "Hairdresser," and "Laundress."⁴⁹

In the evening people gathered here and there in front of houses, enjoying cool air and smoking klobot (cornhusk)-rolled cigarettes. Sounds of guitar, mandolin, and sometimes violin were heard. Salim's house was in Kampong B. It consisted of a small front verandah and a small room and a bedroom inside. There was a rattan chair on the verandah, a small table with two stools in the room, and a sleeping couch overhung with a red-white-blue, Dutch colored mosquito net in the bedroom. Drinking water could be had from the water-butt nearby, but in the dry season one had to go to the river for bathing. In the evening, Salim recalls, he read books under the light of a petroleum lamp. He bought books at the auctions departing civilian and military

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 139; Verslaggever Boven Digoel (Marco), "Riwayat Boven Digoel (I)," *Persatoean Indonesia*, November 15, 1929, No. 33; Tim Penyusun Pembuatan Buku Sejarah Perintis Kemerdekaan, *Citra dan Perjuangan Perintis Kemerdekaan Seri Perjuangan Ex Digul*, p. 75.

⁴⁸ Verslaggever Boven Digoel (Marco), "Riwayat Boven Digoel (IV)," *Persatoean Indonesia*, no. 36, January 1, 1930.

⁴⁹ Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel*, p. 140.

officers held regularly. He also benefited from Hatta's arrival, for Hatta brought with him to Tanah Merah fifteen cases of books.⁵⁰

A *lelang*, auction, was a great occasion for internees in Tanah Merah, like anywhere else in the Indies. It was always held in the evening. After a day's work, internees, dressed as elegantly as they could, went to the military or administrative terrain in groups. On such occasions they did not need to show their passes to the armed guard at the entrance of the military camp. They were guests, and merrily mingled with civilians and soldiers. Drinks were served. Cigars and cigarettes were passed around. The Gramophone was played. And the host was always very nice and friendly.⁵¹

Another great occasion was the Queen Wilhelmina's birthday. The Oranje House was a symbol of the empire, and in those days her portraits were hung all over the Indies, in government and business offices, in the houses of practically every European, Chinese, and native notable, and in many villages in the front verandah (*pendopo*) of the village headman. So were her portraits in Digoel. On her birthday a delegation went to the house of the assistant resident early in the morning to express their congratulations in the name of all internees. A soccer match was held in the afternoon, and in the evening orange-clad people organized a lantern procession and went to the civilian club, *burgersocieteit*, to see a play. In Oranje festivities in Tanah Merah not a few *naturalisten*, those who refused to work for the government, also participated together with those willing to work for the government.⁵²

Internees established many associations: the opera club "Orient," the music and opera group "Liberty," the Sundanese theatrical troupe Kebinangkitan Pasoendan, the Javanese *ketoprak* and *wayang orang* troupe, Langen Moedo Matojo (led by a Solonese internee), and a *kroncong* group headed by Samsuodin Katjamata and Mohamad Jasin from Medan. The most important club, which lasted to the final days of Digoel, was the Kunst en Sportvereniging Digoel, Digoel Arts and Sports Association. It was established in 1928 under Winanta's leadership; Abdul Xarim's jazz band, Digoel Concert, belonged to this club.⁵³

To the north end of the main street, bordering on the jungle, were remains of the long-abandoned Kampung Ujung Sumatra on the river side, and next to it, the graveyard which was kept well-maintained till the last days of the camp. Those who died in Tanah Tinggi, including Marco and Aliarcham, were also buried there. Many were victims of malaria.⁵⁴

The main street turned east there. Along this stretch were the remains of Kampung D, E, F, and G, by the late 1930s overgrown with weeds and being

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 141.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 141-142.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 231-233.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 237-238; Verslaggever Boven Digoel (Marco), "Riwayat Boven Digoel (IV)," *Persatoean Indonesia*, no. 36, January 1, 1930; Tim Penyusun Pembuatan Buku Sejarah Perintis Kemerdekaan, *Citra dan Perjuangan Perintis Kemerdekaan Seri Perjuangan Ex Digul*, p. 84.

⁵⁴ Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel*, p. 142.

“reclaimed” by nature. These quarters were abandoned one by one in the early 1930s when internees started to be released regularly and the camp population declined from the peak of 2,100 in 1929 to less than 1,000 by the mid 1930s. The population of the internment camp at the end of 1939 was 580 in total, 355 men, 66 women, and 159 children.⁵⁵

The Phantom World of Digoel

So there was life in Digoel, not easy, but life nonetheless, social and family life with its own small happiness and messiness. Digoel, with its own small palace, Oranje Park, the military garrison, and the native quarters, looked like any other small town in the Indies, even a little Buitenzorg. But life in Digoel was perverted. It was this “perverted normalcy,” if we use Rudolf Mrázek’s precise words, which can be identified as the hallmark of Digoel.⁵⁶

To see how perverted life was in Digoel, we only need to think about Chalid Salim, our tour guide of Tanah Merah, who has left powerful descriptions of life in Digoel which at times remind us of Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. A well-educated intelligent man in his mid-twenties when he was sent to Digoel in 1927, Salim worked for the malaria control service, looking for breeding places of anopheles—malarial mosquitoes—day in, day out, moving from one ditch to another and from one watertank to another, for fifteen years. It was certainly not what he wanted to do in his life—he was and perhaps wanted to be a journalist—but he persevered because this was his way of keeping his sanity in Digoel and disciplining himself both physically and mentally. No doubt he was aware that his cooperation might improve his chance to be released from Digoel, but at the same time, he could not afford to entertain any real hopes for release because that would make his life in Digoel even more unbearable. Salim was not an exception. Internees were there in Digoel in order not to be there, to return home one fine day. Or they were there to suppress their hope not to be there as the sign that they had not capitulated and to demonstrate to themselves that they had not given up something which made their life meaningful.

This pervertedness was not just psychological, but deeply institutionalized. Salim talks about a set of categories which structured the internee life in Digoel. It consisted of four main categories in Tanah Merah.

The first was *de werkwilligers*, the willing-to-work. They worked in many different jobs, as kampung chiefs and clerks in the local government office, nurses in the hospital, workers for the malaria control service, clerks and coolies in the harbor warehouses, technical workers in the power center and the telephone office, and manual laborers in the fields. All in this category were government employed. The lowliest paid were field workers, their wage being 40 cents a day, about f.10.50 a month, for work from seven thirty in the morning to one o’clock in the afternoon. Clerks and technical workers were better paid, a monthly salary from f.18.75 to f.30, and the best paid was a clerk in the government office who obtained f.90 a month. The

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 143.

⁵⁶ See Mrázek, *Sjahrir*, p. 141.

great majority of the internees were willing to work for the government, because they believed from the beginning—and their expectation was confirmed after Hillen's visit—that it would improve their chances to be released from Digoel.⁵⁷

The second category of internees who had less chance of being released was *de eigenwerkzoekenden*, the self-employed—fishermen, vegetable farmers, store and *warung* (stall) owners, barbers, bakers, tailors, shoemakers, photographers, private teachers. They were given food rations, 18 kilogram rice a man per month, until they could support themselves. The third was *de steuntrekkers*, the relief-recipients or invalids—people with serious chronic illness such as incurable malaria and tuberculosis, neuroses and insanity caused in most cases by their long isolation, great solitude, and homesickness.

The final category was *de naturalisten*, the naturalists, so called because they refused to perform any work for the government and received free food rations *in natura* from the government. Since the local authorities regarded them as undesirable “extremists,” they were natural targets of spies who were many, and their conduct, both fabricated and real, was regularly and systematically reported to the local government. In the early years of the camp history, not a few naturalists were suddenly arrested and sent to the second internment camp for the *onverzoenlijken*, recalcitrants, in Tanah Tinggi. The naturalists had no chance to be returned home, and they were aware of it. As such men of “principle,” their presence reminded the rest of internees, above all those willing-to-work, that they had somehow “capitulated,” an acknowledgement that sometimes elicited admiration, but more often resentment.⁵⁸

In Salim's explanation, the category, this last category, the *onverzoenlijken*, is low-keyed and assimilated into the *naturalisten*; his account may be influenced by the fact that he speaks mainly of the internees in Tanah Merah. If we add this category, however, his explanation is remarkably similar to that given by Hillen in his 1930 report. According to Hillen, the Digoel internees were classified into five categories: the willing-to-work, which included the employed, *geemploieerden*, 110 total, who worked as policemen, telephone workers, teachers and so on, and were paid monthly salary, and the day-laborers, *dagloners*, 380 men and women, who worked for the government, mainly in agriculture; the naturalists, *naturalisten*, 225 in total, who refused to work and received food rations; the recalcitrants, *onverzoenlijken*, seventy men, interned in Tanah Tinggi; the self-employed, 350 men and women; and finally the invalids, forty total.⁵⁹

This classification, shared both by the government and the internees, evolved early in the history of Digoel. When the camp was still under construction, the first man of authority, Captain-administrator Becking, was invested with powers which included, among others, the power to search internees, to hold morning roll-calls, and to require

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 217–218.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 221–225.

⁵⁹ “Rapport Hillen,” in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: 1928–Aug. 1933*, p. 463. See also Ongko D's statement in Sudyono, *PKI Sibar*, pp. 71–72; Soetan Sjahrir, *Out of Exile*, translated with an introduction by Charles Wolf, Jr. (New York: The John Day Company, 1949), pp. 53–54.

each internee to perform *corvée* labor every day with the pay of f.31.50 a month. After the visit of the governor of the Moluccas in July 1927, however, this regime was changed, perhaps to keep "special measures" to a minimum, following de Graeff's instruction more strictly. In a new regulation which was to stay till the end of the camp, the internees were allowed to choose whether or not to work for the government; each internee was to be given allowance of f.0.72 a day *in natura*; and only those willing to work for the government were paid additional f.0.30 a day in cash.⁶⁰ The two categories, those willing to work and the naturalists, as well as the other two auxiliary categories of the self-employed and the invalids, resulted directly from this regulation.

The new regulation, however, was met with internee resistance. Under the leadership of former PKI central leaders, a *kampung* council (*kampungraad*) was organized in each *kampung* and as their central body, the CRD. Centraal Raad Digoel or Digoel Central Council, was formed by the *kampung* council representatives with Sardjono, the former PKI chairman, as chairman, and Soemantri, a former leader of the Semarang section of the PKI, as the executive head. Marco wrote in his report, which was smuggled out in 1929 and published in the PNI organ *Persatoean Indonesia* in late 1929 and early 1930, in these words:

When *controleur* [controller] Monsjou replaced Captain Bekking [sic] as *gezaghebber* [administrator] [in November 1927], the CRD and the *kampung* councils demanded: 1. Give us sufficient *onderstand* [allowances]; 2. Give us sufficient work tools.

Such were the people's demands. They can put Digoel in good order by themselves.

The only duty of the government is to provide its *begrooting* [budget]; responsible for health should be the *dokter* [doctor]. For [our own] domestic affairs we appoint officials. To [our] schools the government may only provide subsidy. At that time people understood and wanted not to receive *onderstand* permanently, but wanted to live as free men [*orang merdeka*].

Their position was that they did not want to become workers of whatever kind [*kaoem boeroeh apa sadja*].

[Their] good intention was always obstructed from within and without like Cooperatie CD [Cooperatie Digoel], PVD [Particuliere Veiligheids Dienst, Private Security Service] and so on. . .⁶¹

If we borrow Abdoel Xarim's words, the CRD and the *kampung* councils thus wanted to create "New Australia—New America," a colony of free men, in Digoel.⁶² But not all internees supported the CRD, as Marco reported. Many *werkwilligen* felt threatened because they were under pressure to join the CRD and a *kampung* council but were

⁶⁰ Verslaggever Boven Digoel (Marco), "Riwayat Boven Digoel (IV)," *Persatoean Indonesia*, January 1, 1930; Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel*, p. 237.

⁶¹ Verslaggever Boven Digoel (Marco), "Riwayat Boven Digoel (III)," *Persatoean Indonesia*, Dec. 15, 1929.

⁶² Abdoel Xarim M.S., *Pandoe Anak Boeangan* (Medan: Uitgevers Genootschap "Aneka," 1933), p. 4.

afraid that it might jeopardize their chances of release. R. M. Gondojoewono, former member of the PKI central committee, then established a vigilante group, PVD and called for their cooperation with the government.⁶³

On May 1, 1928, controller Monsjou decided to destroy the CRD and the kampung councils. Marco again writes:

People who could develop [*memadjoekan*] Digoel without relying on the government power were arrested and are now in exile because of slander [*fitnahan*] . . . by people who are prepared to develop Digoel while leaning on the government power and flattering [*mendjilat*] so that they are soon returned to their old places by the government.⁶⁴

As Marco says, leading members of the CRD and the kampung councils, including Sardjono, Soemantri, Boedisoejtiro, Aliarcham, Dahlan, and Marco himself, were arrested and sent to a temporary internment camp, Gudang Arang, south of Tanah Merah. It was not well-located for a camp, however, for it was flooded whenever the water level of the Digoel River rose. Nor was it sufficiently isolated from Tanah Merah. It was also possible for internees to demonstrate their resistance against the government there. One day in March 1929, the governor of the Moluccas, Monsjou's boss, was on his way to Tanah Merah for an inspection tour. When his ship approached Gudang Arang, its internees stood on the river bank in a row, with their back to the river, pulled down their pants, and greeted him with their bare buttocks. It was too much for him. Shortly after that, Gudang Arang internees were transferred to Tanah Tinggi, forty kilometers up river from Tanah Merah and thus comfortably out of sight.⁶⁵

With the destruction of the CRD, the backbone of internee resistance was broken. "A normal village administration" was introduced soon thereafter and kampung chiefs were appointed from among the leading cooperationists by the local government: Gondojoewono, Hamid Soetan, Soehirman, Daris, and Soeprapto for Kampung A, B, C, D, and E respectively. Gondojoewono's PVD, Private Security Service, was transformed into the ROD, Quiet and Order Guards, and attached to the kampung chiefs. It placed internees, especially naturalists, under surveillance and informed the government of potential troublemakers, *onverzoenlijken*, for their arrest and second internment at Tanah Tinggi.⁶⁶

⁶³ Gondojoewono, a descendent of the nineteenth-century Javanese rebel prince, Diponegoro, was a leading member of the Ternate, Moluccas, PKI, a member of the party central committee from 1923 to 1926, and the first chairman of the seamen's and dockers' union established in 1924. According to Djamaloeddin Tamin, he converted Moesso and Alimin to Communism in Tjipinang prison in 1923. Ruth T. McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), pp. 155, 183, 424, 426, and 461.

⁶⁴ Verslaggever Boven Digoel (Marco), "Riwayat Boven Digoel (IV)," *Persatoean Indonesia*, January 1, 1930.

⁶⁵ Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel*, pp. 269–270.

⁶⁶ The phrase, a normal village administration [*een normaal dorpsbestuur*] is from "Overzicht van de Inwendigen Politieken Toestand (1924–15 April 1928)," in *Mededeelingen der Regeering* (Mei 1928), p. 15.

From the government perspective, the whole point of the matter was how to enforce the new regulation and to introduce "a normal village administration" in the internment camp. In its eyes, those who offered resistance to its effort were *onverzoenlijken*. From Marco's perspective, the question was how to create a space for their own free life (*hidoep merdeka*) in Digoel, and their enemy was above all those who cooperated with the government, flattered it, and slandered them. Either way, however, the same dividing line was drawn between those *onverzoenlijken*/principled and those *werkwilligers*/ass-lickers/slanderers. The constitution of the category, the *onverzoenlijken*, recalcitrants—and the second internment camp for this category of people in Tanah Merah—was indispensable for introducing "normalcy" in Tanah Merah. As Digoel was instituted for the political policing of the Indies and making its colonial order normal, so was Tanah Tinggi needed for policing Tanah Merah and making its order normal.

Entirely different mentalities, therefore, filled the life in the two camps. In Tanah Merah those willing-to-work formed the great majority. They desperately wished to be released from Digoel. The better they behaved and the more they cooperated with the government, the better chances they knew they had to return home. Their expectations were met by the government. After Hillen's visit, those who contributed most to the introduction of normalcy in Tanah Merah, Gondojoewono, Soepradjo, and Soeprapto among them, were released as early as 1931. Boedisoejtiro, who repented his incorrigibility in Tanah Tinggi, returned to Tanah Merah and replaced Gondojoewono as kampung chief in 1931. In a few years he too was allowed to return home.⁶⁷

The life in Tanah Merah in the post-Hillen days thus centered on a tense moment when the list of the names of those to be released was put up on board in front of the office of kampung administration. As the list was put up, many internees crowded around the board to read it. Occasionally a jubilant voice was heard, but many more went home disappointed, feeling they were "forgotten," and then waited for another tense moment to come in a few months.⁶⁸

The internee mentality in Tanah Tinggi was different. It was the place for the *onverzoenlijken* or as Salim put it more neutrally, those who were *nekat*, determined, principled, stubborn, and recalcitrant. They suppressed their hope of returning home and persevered in the hellish life in order not to capitulate. Aside from regular food rations the government provided, they were left entirely to themselves. There was no kampung administration. In 1930 there were 115 inhabitants, 70 internees and 45 family members in Tanah Tinggi. The houses, 43 in total, Hillen wrote, were built "in places wherever they chose, separate from each other, in the forest, surrounded by badly kept gardens." The only road there was the one built by the government, a short entrance road leading to Tanah Tinggi, and since the internees refused to make roads on their own, there were even no paths to link houses with each other. An official sent

See also Verslaggever Boven Digoel (Marco), "Riwayat Boven Digoel (IV)," *Persatoean Indonesia*, January 1, 1930. The statements of Ongko D and Nurut can be found in Sudyono, *PKI-Sibar*, pp. 68–69, 92–93;

⁶⁷ Wiro S. Miardjo's statement can be found in Sudyono, *PKI-Sibar*, p. 73.

⁶⁸ Salim, *Vijftien Jaar Boven-Digoel*, p. 254.

from Tanah Merah stayed in a simple guest house to keep his eyes on the internees, but they shunned him except when they received food rations twice a week.⁶⁹

When Hillen visited Tanah Tinggi, he had an occasion to talk with Najoan, a former leader of the VSTP, railway union, and a member of the PKI since its ISDV (Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging, Indies Social Democratic Association) days. He wrote:

The notorious Najoan declared in earnest: "Life is really quiet here [*Het is daar wel rustig wonen*]." This man has lived in many places in the Archipelago in various jobs and has also visited the Netherlands. Now he finds it "really quiet" in Tanah Tinggi. This shows an abnormal psyche, and perhaps there are various psychopaths among the *onverzoenlijken* . . . Whatever they may be, the residents of Tanah Tinggi do not come into consideration for the moment for return to the free society.⁷⁰

No doubt Hillen thought Najoan, who eventually disappeared in the thick hostile jungle in 1942 in his fourth and last attempt at escape, was crazy. Perhaps he thought that Najoan and his fellow inmates had succumbed to nature and were reduced to a part of nature. Undoubtedly nature was the undisputed master in Tanah Tinggi. Hillen must have felt that the inmates could not possibly create a human world, a human reality, there and that therefore nature remained, in all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality—compared to which they appeared to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike. Damped in Tanah Tinggi, they appeared to Hillen to be reduced to natural human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, in short, real *naturalisten*, not very different from their Papuan neighbors, though without their freedom and innocence. But they were not. They kept their ghostlike human reality in that phantom world of Digoel.⁷¹

The internees in Tanah Tinggi were divided into three "cliques" in the mid-1930s. There were people who continued to see Aliarcham as their leader, an example they should follow for what a communist man should be like, long after his death in 1931. Another group was led by Sardjono, Ngadiman, and Winanta, who ran their own communist cadre training courses in this phantom world. The third group was led by three Moscow returnees, "Hadji Moskow," Waworoentoe, Daniel Kamoe, and Clementi Wentoe, who were proud of their Moscow training and insisted that all the books other than those published in Russia were fakes. In 1935 the three groups met, and after a long discussion, concluded with a "convertie anti-pendigoelan [anti-Digoel-internment convention]," in essence the pledge, despite their mutual antagonisms, not to capitulate. But Sardjono repented his recalcitrance in 1937, and arguing that "the goal justifies the means," his group asked for the transfer to Tanah Merah. The Moscow hadjis followed suit shortly thereafter. Thus remained in Tanah Merah only those "true followers of Aliarcham"—twenty-five in total—who somehow managed to

⁶⁹ "Rapport Hillen," in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: 1928–Aug. 1933*, pp. 467–468.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

⁷¹ See in this connection Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 192.

survive until the camp closure in 1943, at which time they were evacuated to Australia.⁷²

It should be clear by now why Digoel with its perverted normalcy was a metaphor for the Indies. As we have seen, Tanah Tinggi was needed to create normalcy in Tanah Merah as Digoel was instituted to establish normalcy in the Indies. Normalcy was achieved in the Indies and in Digoel, because of this isomorphic structure, the insertion of Digoel in the Indies and that of Tanah Tinggi in Digoel. One wonders then what was this normalcy in the Indies if the normalcy created in Digoel was fundamentally perverted, for if one can not say that Tanah Merah was normal while Tanah Tinggi was abnormal, one can not say either that the Indies was normal while Digoel was abnormal. Instead, normalcy appeared in relativity: the Indies appeared normal compared to Digoel, as Tanah Merah appeared normal compared to Tanah Tinggi. It was not just isolation, but isolation in the heart of the hostile, overwhelming, majestic nature that threatened to reduce anyone to a part of nature, natural human beings devoid of the specifically human character, in Tanah Tinggi, where Hillen thought psychopaths were the only form of "human" existence. Compared to Tanah Tinggi, Tanah Merah was infinitely more human, more civilized, and more normal, and so was the Indies compared to Digoel. The Indies colonial order was constituted, in this sense, on the phantom world of Digoel, and there lay the most important meaning of Digoel.

It should not be surprising, then, that this isomorphism of the Indies/Digoel and Digoel/Tanah Tinggi was accompanied with another isomorphic social mapping. We have seen that the internees were classified into the three categories of *werkwilligen*, *naturalisten*, and *onverzoenlijken* and that the insertion of Tanah Tinggi in Digoel and the creation of normalcy in Tanah Merah compared to the phantom world of Tanah Tinggi was made operative on the basis of this classification. We have also seen that this set of categories emerged in Digoel in negotiations between the state and internees. In the Indies outside Digoel, another set of categories—cooperatists, non-cooperatists, and revolutionaries/extremists—evolved in the same years, again in negotiations between the Indies political policing regime and Indonesians, without which the insertion of Digoel in the Indies for the creation of normalcy there would not have been as effective and operative as it was. This means that we can understand above ground Indonesian nationalist politics, both cooperationist and non-cooperationist, in the Indies only if we also look at revolutionary underground politics, however phantom-like they were, just as we can understand Tanah Merah with its *werkwilligen* and *naturalisten* only if we also look at Tanah Tinggi and its ghostlike *onverzoenlijken*. Life in Digoel was perverted in a profoundly politicized way, and it is in the mirror of its pervertedness where we can see the perverted normal order in the Indies reflected.

Its Closing Years

When Tjarda van Starkenborgh Stachouwer replaced de Jonge as governor general in 1936, and especially after Welter became minister of colonies in 1937, Digoel after so

⁷² The statements of Wiro S. Miardja and Nurut, in Sudyono, *PKI-Sibar*, pp. 74–76, 96–98. Wiro S. Miardja and Nurut, as well as Ongko D., whose statement is also included in Sudyono's book, survived in Tanah Tinggi until its closure.

many years once again became a major issue in The Hague and Buitenzorg. It was partly because Digoel was part of Welter's past—he participated in the decision to create a mass internment camp in late 1926 when he was a member of the council of the Netherlands Indies, and he was its vice president when it discussed Hillen's report in 1930—but more importantly because the international situations were changing fast, with the Nazis in power in Germany and Japanese military invasion begun in China. The note on Digoel which Petrus Blumberger submitted to Welter was the earliest sign of his active interest in the question.

In December 1938, Welter sent a note to Petrus Blumberger for drafting his letter to the governor general, in support of his recent decision to release twenty internees from Digoel as "a step further on the way to abolish this place of exile except for the onverzoenlijken." He then wrote:

That in my view the effort should be made to liquidate this place of exile as fast as possible.

That . . . I am of opinion that the establishment of a distinct internment camp should be regarded as permissible only as an exceptional measure . . .

. . .

That I am of opinion that the Netherlands authority over the Indies derives its great moral prestige in the world from its effective and humane administrative methods and [therefore I believe that] the sooner it can do without the exceptional means of a special place of internment, the better.

Welter thus suggested that Digoel should be replaced with the traditional method of internment in the not too distant future, with internees to be dispersed widely in many areas where they could not hope to have any political influence because of their linguistic differences and that the internment camp in Digoel should be abolished "with the exception of that of the 'onverzoenlijken.'" ⁷³

The Indies government, however, received his suggestions without enthusiasm. The prosecutor general, for instance, argued that the traditional method would not work as effectively as it used to because of the spread of Malay in the Indies and the increased possibilities of contact with the outside world once internees were placed outside the camp.⁷⁴ The retention of Digoel was decided on at a meeting of the council of the Netherlands Indies in December 1938, though in the first half of 1938, 118 more internees were released, reducing the internee population in Digoel to 345 by July 1938, including 42 internees in Tanah Tinggi.⁷⁵

In May 1940 Welter once again wrote a note, expressing his disappointment in the slow progress of Digoel's liquidation.

⁷³ "Notitie van de minister van koloniën [Welter], 23 dec. 1937," in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: Aug. 1933–1942*, pp. 474–485. Based on this note, a letter was sent to the governor general, dated December 29, 1937.

⁷⁴ "Procureur-generaal [H. Marcella] aan gouverneur-generaal [Tjarda van Starkenborgh Stachouwer], 9 nov. 1938," in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: Aug. 1933–1942*, pp. 552–554.

⁷⁵ Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: Aug. 1933–1942*, pp. 552 and 556.

A departure was made in 1927 [from the long established internment practice] because hundreds of people had to be interned simultaneously then. Thus was born, perforce, the camp in New Guinea. But it is in contravention with a long tradition and with the experiences gained thereby, to use the Boven Digoel concentration camp again for "normal" internment, normal in the sense that they always took place and will take place for now and perhaps permanently. In my view the old tradition should be followed for such internment.⁷⁶

Fourteen years after its establishment, one of the founders thus admitted that Digoel was a concentration camp, not even for "normal" internment, let alone for a normal life. Yet it survived for three more years, until 1943, two years after the most part of the Indies was occupied by the Japanese. That year the Indies government in exile in Melbourne became sufficiently worried about the possibility of the internees being liberated by the Japanese, so it decided to liquidate it altogether and to evacuate all internees to Australia. Evacuation was carried out by Ch. O. van der Plas and the camp closed in 1943.

Thus the history of the Digoel concentration camp came to an end and with it the last remnant of the political policing regime the Dutch fashioned in the Indies in the final years of their rule. The post-revolt years from 1927 to 1942 can be understood in this sense as the age of Digoel, for the normalcy in the Indies in these years was constituted fundamentally on the phantom world of Digoel. Digoel and its camps functioned both to refract and to reflect the normal, that is Digoel by definition demarcated the boundaries between the normal and abnormal, the cooperative and the recalcitrant, thereby separating the rational colonial order and the psychopathic fringe population, and in doing so it mirrored the very regime that institutionalized and marginalized it. Normalcy was thus contingent on a complex apparatus of policing that marked and partitioned colonial territories, subjects, and signs.

⁷⁶ "Notitie van de minister van koloniën [Welter], May 6, 1940, in Kwantes, *De Ontwikkeling: Aug. 1933–1942*, pp. 744–745.